



LOCOMBIA a project conceived and organised by Fernando Arias with Ana Maria Millán, Wilson Diaz and Carolina Caycedo in collaboration with Gasworks and Space Studios and supported by Arts Council England and Visiting Arts

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Elephant&Castle Shopping Centre

Dates

Residency Programme: April, May, June 2004
Way Out Exhibition: 29th May 2004
Open Studios: 10th - 13th June 2004
Locombia Weekend Event and Exhibition: 19th - 20th June 2004

Other participating artists in the Way Out exhibition at Elephant and Castle: Jairo Pinilla, Andres Sandoval, Loop, Maria Ines Rodriguez, Leonardo Herrera, Elkin Calderón, Marcela Gomez, 24/7, Florencia Guillén

www.locombiaweekend.com

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Locombia (Loco in Spanish means mad, crazy) comes from inverting the letters in the word Colombia in an attempt to name the surreal social, political and economic situation affecting the country. Violence has been a feature of Colombian life since the 1950's when the first armed leftwing revolutionary groups were formed; in response the government encouraged the creation of ultra-right paramilitary forces to help the army suppress the guerrillas. Add to this the drug cartels and you can begin to understand the equation: the fight to control the coca-growing regions as well as the profits from the cocaine industry have confronted the different groups further, making violence escalate to unprecedented levels. Meanwhile inhabitants of the countryside have been displaced or killed, while cities have become fortified enclaves disconnected from each other, places where a sense of normality, everydayness and civility are achieved amidst the risk of sudden attacks or the fear of being kidnapped. In the meantime, the number of Colombians of all social classes who live dislocated in exile outside the country continues to grow¹.

How then can artistic practices in or from Colombia deal with this situation of permanent conflict? And where "the ideological effect of mass media has been eroded to such a point that the characteristics of the conflict have been made banal"², how can artists deal with the traumatic character of the situation without resorting to negation or simple documentation? Furthermore is it possible for the aesthetic act to address the political situation while becoming a medium to recalibrate relationships within this fragmented society?

Locombia is a project conceived by Fernando Arias which presents the work of four Colombian artists. As part of the project, Arias invited two of the artists living in Cali, Colombia, to live and work in London for three months and to develop new work. The culminating exhibition is an attempt to portray the impact of violence, survival and displacement within this complex context and their influence within artistic practices. In the 1999 Venice Biennale, Arias was already questioning such relations within the art world: there he placed a transparent donation box inside the Arsenale because he never received Colombia's allocated funds for his original project. Money inserted into the box had to be rolled up to fit inside a small hole, in the same way it is rolled up by cocaine users inhaling the drug. The video he shows in Locombia, "Shot on Location", is presented on two screens: on one, we see the artist's red eye painfully observing, while on the other we see images of violence and death taken from television as the words inhale-exhale are continuously repeated, repositioning the responsibility of the conflict not only on the producers but also on those consuming cocaine worldwide.

Based in Cali, Colombia, Wilson Diaz has continuously dealt with the situation of the conflict: from smuggling coca seeds by ingesting and defecating them to grow in the new destination, to videotaping teenagers belonging to FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces) taking their daily bath in a river. A year ago, when his sister Janeth was brutally murdered, Wilson converted to Christianity. His work since then has united art and religion, as a way of spiritually surviving within the conflict. In a homage to his sister, but also as a way of healing his own pain, Wilson has painted portraits of his nieces and nephews; images of yet another family destroyed by the effects of war, but also images of survival and hope.

Also from Cali, Ana María Millán has worked extensively using media, animation and television as a way to reach broader audiences. As part of Helena Producciones, a collective of artists to which she belongs, Ana Maria together with Wilson Diaz directs "Loop", a TV programme transmitted regionally from the state university in Cali. In one of the sections Ana Maria presents local bands (rap, rock, gothic, etc) who she later interviews, offering a critical documentation on how global culture is localized, translated, digested and transformed in the peripheries of the periphery. During her residency in SPACE in London, Ana Maria has been developing video documentation about punk culture in Cali while tracing its origins in London and Spain. The work responds to requests of her friends back home, who when knowing she was coming to London asked her to bring back t-shirts and memorabilia of bands and concerts. For them, as for her before, London exists as a myth, as the place of origin of counterculture, as a mental space where to escape from isolation.

Carolina Caycedo was born to Colombian parents in London. Carolina uses art to create conditions for equal social exchange and as a platform to give voices to unrepresented groups. In 2002 she set up a stall at London's Brick Lane Market where she sold many of her possessions at low prices. The money raised from the sale was then used to pay for the materials to produce and sew a flag made from a combination of the British and Colombian flags. The flag was then hung on the outside wall of 24/7 Gallery³. For her participation in Locombia, her British-Colombian flag will head the public march "Immigrants Influence Home Cultures" in which Carolina invites migrants, people related to migrants, and people who agree that migration laws should be revised.

Finally, 24/7 Gallery invited Miguel Angel and Viviana Ospina, a Colombian couple who sell food from their caravan outside Bar Lorca in Brixton, to sell empanadas (Colombian savoury food) during Locombia. For this occasion the caravan was designed and painted by artist Elkin Calderon and Arias himself with a combination of the United States' and Colombian flags. The blue area which normally contains the white stars representing the states belonging to the United States have fallen down and been replaced by the map of Colombia signalling the involvement of the United States within the conflict, but also the resistance of many Colombians to becoming another star in the flag⁴.

Within London's commodified art scene, Locombia offers a complex vision on how different groups and individuals are using aesthetics to deal with intricate social and political situations. It opens a space for aesthetic proposals and a public which are normally marginalized from contemporary art.

Pablo León de la Barra, 2004.

1 It is estimated that only in England 150,000 Colombians have settled, "Noticias Latinoamericanas", May 2004.

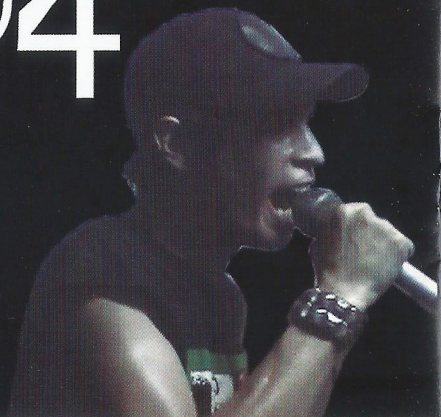
2 From Jaime Cerón, "Rodeando los Bordes, practicas artisticas contemporaneas en Colombia" in María Inés Rodríguez, ¿Las Ilusiones Perdidas? Panorama del arte contemporáneo colombiano, V Bienal del Caribe, 2003.

3 www.24-7bombthemuseum.org

4 Under Plan Colombia the United States will give half a billion dollars to the Colombian military to battle the "terrorist" guerrillas under the cover of antidrug operations. Its likely effects will be the intensification of the internal armed conflict, an increase on human rights violations and the continuous displacement of thousands of civilians. Part of the interest of the United States comes from having access to Colombian oil potential, similar to the one of neighboring Venezuela the second largest oil supplier to the United States.



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